William Gibson: An Exploration of Postmodern, Posthuman and Futuristic Territories

Synopsis of the Thesis

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1 Science Fiction: An Introduction

The phrase 'science fiction' has become synonymous with world-building and thought experiments. Momentous technological progress in recent years has created a favourable environment for the growth of science fiction. The awe and wonder that we felt while being part of the massive economic growth and technological progress have made us go to science fiction to seek answers for perplexing questions such as: where will all this technological progress take us? Is there a limit to such progress? Are there alternative mediums of progress that are more 'human' than current technology? Science fiction has been exploring possibilities and opportunities which are assumed to be the outcomes of scientific inventions and discoveries. In addition, the complexity of the modern world has given scope for the development of new sets of theories that have found expression in imaginative literary forms such as science fiction.

As a genre, science fiction has become mainstream in recent decades. Historians of science fiction have identified various factors responsible for its popularity and adoption by the mainstream.[1] Science fiction based futuristic content has flourished in visual mediums such as television, film, comics, video games and online streaming services. Various sub-genres of science fiction have found suitable avenues for development due to the explosive growth of modern communication technologies. The ultra-sensitive political atmosphere around the world coupled with immense economic growth and development have provided not only themes and tropes for science fiction but also a platform for writers and futurists to find refuge in imaginative worlds—both utopian and dystopian, either to speculate consequences of current realities or to conjure alternative worlds and realities. A solid fan base for various popular and niche sub-genres of science fiction has led

[1]Adam Roberts in *The History of Science Fiction* (2016), and Gerry Canavan and Eric Carl Link in *The Cambridge History of Science Fiction* (2019) discuss the development of science fiction as a genre.

to the flourishing of science fiction content. Astronomical advances in the field of communication technologies, artificial intelligence, machine learning, robotics, medical human enhancement, prosthetics, space exploration and associated areas have not only created intense enthusiasm among the media-consuming populace about the science-fictional nature of the present but also created a conducive atmosphere for the establishment of science fiction as a classic genre in the literary world. As a genre that emerged at the dawn of the twentieth century, science fiction witnessed the period's major social, cultural, and political upheavals.

2 William Gibson's Career and Works

William Gibson is an American-Canadian science fiction writer. Gibson's unique art was the synthesis of works of several writers and genres, especially science fiction, that he read while growing up as a lonely teenager in the remote rural town of Wytheville in Virginia. While studying at the University of British Columbia, he was encouraged by his professor to write his first story "Fragments of a Hologram Rose" as an assignment for a class, which he later published in the science fiction magazine *Unearth* in 1977. At this juncture, Gibson met Bruce Sterling, who persuaded him to be a full-time writer. After publishing a few more critically acclaimed short stories—"The Gernsback Continuum" (1981), "Johnny Mnemonic" (1981) and "Burning Chrome" (1982)—Gibson was able to secure a contract for a novel from Ace Books which helped him to try his luck as a novelist with his debut novel *Neuromancer* (1984). Being a launching pad for his stellar career as a writer of science fiction novels, *Neuromancer*, winning three prestigious awards (Hugo, Nebula and Philip K. Dick), is widely considered as the book that defined the cyberpunk sub-genre and cyberpunk culture.

With the publication of *Neuromancer*, Gibson came to be recognised as the leading author of the "cyberpunk" movement that inspired a generation of writers

and readers who helped it gain mainstream status. Gibson first used the word "cyberspace" in his story "Burning Chrome" written in 1982. His prescience about the rise of the internet and virtual reality is widely acknowledged in academic circles and the mainstream media. As experiments in the development of his cyberpunk aesthetic, Gibson's early stories present his obsession with technology and punk sensibility. His most critically acclaimed first novel, *Neuromancer*, examines the blurring of the boundaries between the human and the machine in a world dominated by powerful multinational corporations, and thus lays the foundation for his subsequent two novels of *Sprawl* trilogy, *Count Zero* and *Mona Lisa Overdrive*. *Count Zero* considers themes related to virtual reality and brings in divine elements to cyberspace in the form of Voodoo Loa. *Mona Lisa Overdrive* fuses cyberpunk sensibility with pop-cultural celebrityhood. The *Bridge* trilogy explores the life of the marginalised people in a post-apocalyptic dystopian world and pitches it against the hyperreality of celebrity life. In the first novel of the *Bridge* trilogy, *Virtual Light*, the iconic San Francisco-Oakland Bay bridge is converted into an interstitial space that becomes the symbol of subversion and individual creativity in the dehumanising capitalistic world order. Whereas the other two novels of the trilogy, *Idoru* and *All Tomorrow's Parties*, attempt to defy reality by fusing the marginal existence of the underclass with the extremely media-saturated existence of the pop-cultural celebrities. The texts of the *Blue Ant* trilogy—*Pattern Recognition*, *Spook Country* and *Zero History*—present a capitalist world crippled with excessive information where branding and advertising dominate the future. The language, neologisms and iconography used by Gibson in his novels and short stories provide an adequate framework for us to make sense of the information age.

3 Gibson's Fiction and the Evolution of Cyberpunk Aesthetics

Since the publication of his first story, Gibson has experimented with several tropes, themes and styles. Some elements have lingered on spanning many of his narratives, and others have quickly faded out from the limelight. Though thoroughly science-fictional at the beginning, he has brought in narrative ingredients of mainstream fiction in his *Bridge* trilogy and *Blue Ant* trilogy with an aim to bring in more diversity into his fictional world. In a way, Gibson's novels straddle both mainstream preoccupations and niche interests leading to productive cross-fertilization. Rather than highlighting the future as an edgy techno-heaven to be attained by techno-transcendence, as he did in his early stories and novels, Gibson, in his later novels, paints the future as a dystopia mired in day-to-day realities of postmodern life.

Gibson's early short stories convey the formation of a new kind of nascent aesthetic that would emerge later as full-fledged cyberpunk style with the publication of *Neuromancer* (1984). The recurring themes of *Sprawl* trilogy are corporate power, criminal delinquency, illegal trade of body parts and electronic peripherals, AI-controlled virtual worlds, dystopian landscapes, drug addiction and human-machine interface. As the first novel by Gibson, *Neuromancer* redefined literary boundaries through its conceptualization of cyberspace and by giving shape to the cyberpunk movement. It attained wide acclaim by being a seminal study of the human-machine paradigm. The novel emerged as the most representative text of postmodernity due to its attempt to examine diverse possibilities offered by unrestrained technological developments such as AIs, biotech, prosthetics, cashless economy, living as a computer construct, advanced communications, and so on. While envisaging the role of technology as a dominant force for the imminent

future, the novel reoriented the trajectory of science fiction into the completely new uncharted territories.

Count Zero (1986), as the second novel of Gibson's *Sprawl* trilogy, derives its plot from the outcome emanating from the events that closed the action of *Neuromancer*. However, the novel features a new set of characters and a reinvigorated action with the presence of an extremely powerful AI that was the outcome of the merger of the two AI's, Neuromancer and Wintermute. Also, cyberspace is revitalized with self-awareness due to the presence of divine elements in the form of voodoo loa, who serve as fronts for the all-powerful AI. The presence of divinity signifies the omnipotence of AI. The biochip, implanted in Angela Mitchell's brain, allowing direct connectivity to cyberspace, is a highly coveted chip designed by Christopher Mitchell with the help of AIs: the scramble to posses the design of the chip results in a war-like operation by the Japanese conglomerate Hosaka to instigate the defection of the star scientist of Mass Biolabs, Christopher Mitchell. The high-profile heist hatched with the help of mercenaries and hackers is deranged, and Turner, the hired mercenary, in a surprising turn of the plot, is able to smuggle out Angela Mitchel, daughter of Christopher Mitchel. Angela Mitchell's superhuman abilities, coupled with Bobby Newmark's hacking skills, Turner's professional approach and Marly Krushkhova's discovery of the secret behind AIs powers, help in neutralizing Josef Virek, whose evil desire for immortality was the main driving force of the narrative. The plot of the novel foregrounds truly postmodern characteristics by weaving in markedly heterogeneous elements such as art, AI, voodoo loa, brain implants and longing for immortality.

Mona Lisa Overdrive (1988), with a noir infused thriller plot, instantiates Gibson's interest in pop culture and celebrity life that would feature as another long obsession of his writing. Involving a complex plot that shuffles between multiple storylines, the text provides a sneak peek into the world behind the façade of criminality and technological sublime, with several of the major characters from

the previous two novels appearing alongside the new ones. The novel ascends into new territories with its exploration of newer technological paradigms such as a sentient virtual personal assistant, computerised existence away for the body for longer periods and construction of robots as an outlet for psychic trauma. The novel emerges as an interesting study into the ambit of agency that the characters possess by being part of a deterministic future world. The central characters seem to be under the aegis of other powerful characters: Kumiko has been sent to London by her father to keep her away from the clutches of the criminal world; she is again under the tight protection of Petal and Sally Shears; Slick Henry is obsessively involved in the creation of mechanical structures as an outlet for the trauma that he experienced while undergoing punishment for being a car thief; Angie's celebrity life is a reality show scripted by the AI, Continuity, under the behest of her employer Sense/Net; and the eponymous character Mona's life is completely puppeted by other people like the old man, Eddy and many others till the end. By fusing celebrity culture with technological possibilities, the novel makes us rethink the notions of identity and subjectivity.

The *Bridge* trilogy introduces a distinct experiment in science fiction with the abandoned San Francisco-Oakland Bay bridge as a central trope. The bridge built for vehicular traffic has been reappropriated into a vibrant space teeming with life and activity like a space-constrained urban environment where people must adapt to structural and spatial limitations. Added to the challenges presented by the spatial constraints, the bridge was to be abandoned after the devastating earthquake crippled it and left it unfit for transportation. The catastrophe that befalls the land after the earthquake has also been responsible for the dystopian setting of *Virtual Light* (1993). Differing significantly from previous novels with regard to the dominant theme of the plot, the search for the lost virtual light glasses becomes the central motif of the narrative. Gibson locates the plot in a near-future time just a few years ahead of the publication. The bridge is inhabited by a group

of people who have been displaced and dispossessed due to the catastrophe that befell the land. The delineation of the life on the bridge runs parallel to the quest for the lost glasses. As an attempt to foreground the centrality of life on the bridge, Gibson uses a sociology researcher from Japan, Shinya Yamazaki, who comes to San Francisco to study the bridge community. Also, a veteran of the bridge community, Skinner, the first man to inhabit the bridge, is interviewed by Yamazaki. Modelled on the real densely populated ungoverned cities like Kowloon Walled City in Hong Kong and spawning a full-fledged autonomous society on the bridge in the style of an enclave, the bridge community becomes the centre of attention for the entire world. In this way, the bridge serves as a metaphor for a postmodern world where the communities on the margins relocate to a most inhospitable space and build up their lives with ingenuity and perseverance.

The second novel of the trilogy, *Idoru* (1996), wrestles together popular culture and posthuman possibilities with the presence of a computer construct—a virtual woman—as a pop-cultural icon. Gibson explores extreme narrative possibilities with the protagonist, Rez, a Lo/Rez rock band member, announcing his willingness to marry the virtual woman. Laney, an expert in detecting patterns, is employed by the band's management to probe the motive behind Rez's announcement. Explaining the motive behind the creation of Rei Toei, Kuwayama tell Laney that "popular culture [. . .] is the testbed of our futurity."[2] With its profound enquiry into the pop cultural phenomena, the novel emerges as a serious study into the ephemeral nature of contemporary celebrity culture.

Being the last novel of the trilogy, *All Tomorrow's Parties* (1999) examines many of the concerns Gibson brought to the fore already in the trilogy. With the presence of characters from the previous two novels and several overlapping themes, the novel explores many contemporary issues that are central to other novels of the trilogy. As it was published in the year 1999, the novel emerges as a covert

[2]William Gibson, *Idoru* (New York: Berkley Books, 1997), p.314.

meditation on the prospects for the human race as the world was about to move into the twenty-first century. Laney's prophetic pronouncement of the apocalyptic doom, in the form of the burning of the bridge, foreshadowed the general anxieties present at the end of the millennium. The novel is also an extended meditation on the possibility of fully autonomous existence in an abandoned space like the derelict bay bridge. In the spirit of science-fictional narratives being a medium for imaginative experimentation, the bridge, by offering a newer spatial experience, allows Gibson to contemplate on the nature of human relations under extremely dehumanizing conditions.

The*Bigend* trilogy represents Gibson's fictional foray into the world of consumer culture, where advertising and marketing have become the major forces with the emergence of a homogeneous post-capitalist global culture. Furthermore, Gibson examines the intersection of art and technology with profit-driven consumerist strategies resulting in the commodification of culture. *Pattern Recognition* (2003) explores the effects of an enigmatic viral internet phenomenon on the global community: the aftermath of the anonymous dissemination of mysterious video clips on the internet with cryptic clues about the creator. The ensuing quest for the source of the videos by Cayce Pollard is sponsored by Hubertus Bigend, the founder of the marketing/advertising firm Blue Ant. The final revelation of the source and the maker reveals that the real motive behind the videos was a mix of superhuman creativity, marketing and extreme trauma. Along with the depiction of the influence of the internet and technology on contemporary culture, the novel's chronological momentum is shaped by the events of the 9/11 terrorist attacks.

As it is a pastime for the ultra-rich to indulge in obscure obsessions, Bigend is enthralled by another dazzling phenomenon in *Spook Country* (2007) which compels him to commission another quest similar to the one in the previous novel. The investigator is Hollis Henry, who has just taken up a career as a journalist after the dissolution of the rock band, the Curfew, in which she was the lead singer.

The quest seems to be focussed on a cutting-edge art form called locative art based on augmented reality and GPS positioning. However, locative art turns out to be a thin veneer in front of a global scale anti-corruption campaign. Legalised corruption by the US government entities, committed under the guise of funding democratic reforms in countries like Iraq, is undermined by an altruistic incorruptible mob group, headed by a renegade ex-CIA agent, operating like a criminal network. Thus, the novel, with the help of an inventive plotline, takes on a pertinent contemporary concern and delivers a captivating denouement.

Keeping up with Gibson's inquiry into the ramifications of consumer culture, *Zero History* (2010) features a quest that is centred on a typically consumeristic mission, with its goal being the search for the founder/maker of a secretive fashion brand, Gabriel Hounds. However, the quest loses its intensity when the characters get embroiled in altercations arising when the espionage effort by the adversaries is derailed. Nevertheless, the quest ends with success when the protagonist, Hollis Henry, meets the maker in a denim shop. The altercation leads to a hostage situation and later to prisoner's exchange stunt with the enemy, leading to an easy success for Bigend's side. The novel makes a thinly veiled reference to the financial crisis of the naughties when Hollis Henry talks about losing money in the "crash."[3]

4 Justification for the Doctoral Dissertation

William Gibson's fiction deals with the *novum* of science and technology as a mode for the exploration of the posthuman condition. A study of a scientifically transformed future phenomenon requires a deeper understanding of the forces that shape and transform the existing situation. Gibson's fiction explores the social and ethical implications of a future dominated by cyborgs—machine/organic hybrid beings. The intense attention towards penetration of technology into the enhancement of the human physical and mental abilities differentiates Gibson's

[3]William Gibson, *Zero History* (London: Viking, 2010), ch.9.

fiction from that of other science fiction writers. His writing marks a significant shift away from the extreme romanticization of technology characteristic of traditional science fiction writing.

William Gibson examines the perennial questions concerning the future of humanity against the backdrop of a world riven with technological advancements through a notoriously upbeat sub-genre of cyberpunk in the postmodern stream of science fiction. He is responsible for injecting cyber-culture into the popular consciousness, speculating on the idea of living within cyber-culture, and demolishing the experimental nature and 'ghetto' status of counter-cultural streams such as cyberpunk and steam-punk, and thereby drawing the attention of mainstream science fiction fans to his hallucinatory futuristic visions. In mapping the influence of Gibson's novels on the contemporary world, Lance Olsen notes that Gibson's narratives transcend "academic and generic boundaries."[4] Lance Olsen argues that "Gibson speaks powerfully to a large part of our culture's desires, fears, and obsessions about such things as multinationals, global politics, computerized data, genetic engineering, cybernetics, techno-angst, and, ultimately, what it means to be human in an age that is infinitely complex, unnerving, and possibly posthuman."[5]

Gibson's adoption of cyberpunk, an obscure genre of science fiction, was occasioned by his interest in the counter-culture, which had a pervasive influence on destabilizing the post-war status-quo, and technology, which was soon becoming an inseparable feature of contemporary social reality. The unpredictable but inevitable consequences of developments in technology, culture, and socio-economic organization in the last decades of the twentieth century have made Gibson's novels archetypal examples of contemporary socio-cultural predicament. Hence, I realised that there was scope for examining cyberpunk as a narrative space. Therefore my thesis is a humble contribution in this direction.

[4]Lance Olsen, *William Gibson* (Mercer Island: Starmont House, 1992), ch.1.
[5]Lance Olsen, *William Gibson*, ch.1.

5 Thesis Statement

With thorough depictions of technologically mediated worlds, William Gibson highlights the fundamentally revolutionary role of technology in the globalised multicultural world. Also, Gibson's oeuvre transcends literary boundaries in the use of the science-fictional narrative space to reflect upon the contemporary postmodern condition.

6 Thesis Structure: Chapters

In the first chapter, along with a brief introduction to the genre of science fiction, I have charted the developments that lead to the emergence of cyberpunk in the eighties. The forces that played a prominent role in foregrounding cyberpunk aesthetics are explored in this chapter. My main focus here is to demonstrate the role played by Gibson in making cyberpunk a prominent genre of science fiction. I have also elaborated upon my choice of William Gibson's writings for my research work. In doing so, I have focused on why Gibson's work has garnered significant critical interest since the publication of his first novel *Neuromancer*. The chapter provides a biographical introduction to the authors' life and literary career. Also, in the chapter, I have examined the ways in which the ideas envisaged by Gibson in his works have become the mainstays of academic and popular interest. The chapter also provides a detailed picture of the author's literary achievements.

The second chapter provides an overview of the studies on cyberpunk and William Gibson's works. Here, I elaborate on the studies and research done on Gibson's oeuvre. Because Gibson is a pre-eminent exponent of the cyberpunk subgenre, his narratives have garnered considerable academic and critical interest. Cyberpunk, as a sub-genre, was responsible for reorienting the trajectory of science fiction by making it more susceptible to contemporary concerns and preoccupations. With the stress on excessive technological engagement, cyberpunk significantly

influenced the perception of technology in literature. Also, it paved the way for an interesting representation of counter-cultural dynamics in literature. Though Gibson's novels are thoroughly futuristic, they mirror the contemporary political climate, capitalistic tendencies, technological engagement and societal concerns. In this chapter, I have also attempted to locate Gibson's work in the science fiction genre by presenting a comprehensive literature review of the fictional and non-fictional writings of the author and the secondary and other writings on Gibson. Also, I have used the insights and perspectives of other researchers, critics and theorists to substantiate my thesis statement.

In the third chapter, I explore Gibson's writings in the light of my thesis statement. I have drawn upon examples and statements from Gibson's early work to support and qualify my arguments. Here, I have focused on Gibson's early short stories and his critically acclaimed *Sprawl* trilogy. Gibson's short stories and the novels of *Sprawl* trilogy broach diverse themes and perspectives such as fluidity of the gender roles, collapsing of boundaries between nature and technology, human-machine interface, futuristic technology and gadgets, bioengineering, body enhancing surgeries, virtual spaces, artificial intelligence, transgression and criminal behaviour, media saturation, the waxing power of multinationals and the waning influence of nation-states, dilapidated urban landscapes, use of drugs for enhancing body and beauty and many more. Through the depiction of contemporary manifestations of radicalism defined by technological obsession, drug culture, punk lifestyle and criminality, Gibson's works offer a powerful social critique. Also, with the eclectic mix of various styles, techniques and borrowings, Gibson presents before us authentic postmodern science fictional texts that match the narrative verve of mainstream texts. With the narrative advantage of science-fictional world-building, Gibson, in these texts, thoroughly interrogates the contemporary techno-social condition.

The fourth chapter, which continues my arguments in the third chapter, deals with Gibson's two trilogies published after the *Sprawl* trilogy. The two trilogies, *Bridge* and *Bigend*, examined in this chapter, portray a major turn in Gibson's style and engagement. Moving away from cyberpunk poetics and far-future depictions, Gibson settles down to contemporary concerns and near-future alternative worlds. However, in these narratives, he shows a steady engagement with the way technological and post-capitalistic undercurrents characterize the contemporary socio-cultural environment. By showing how life in the postmodern world is deeply enmeshed with information and media technologies, Gibson's narratives, with a thoroughly postmodern fictional depiction of the contemporary world, foreground the mediated, constructed, and discursive nature of reality.

The concluding chapter considers the significance of Gibson's work in the contemporary world. With thorough depictions of technological mediated worlds, Gibson highlights the fundamentally revolutionary role of technology in the globalised multicultural world. Through his judicious choice of science-fictional motifs along with an idiosyncratic narrative style, his works come out as tool kits to reflect upon contemporary socio-cultural reality. With a heady mix of cyberpunk aesthetics with postmodern sensibilities, Gibson's narratives present themselves as definitive explorations of multiple configurations of technologically mediated social worlds. In this way, Gibson oeuvre transcends literary boundaries in the use of the science-fictional narrative space to reflect upon the contemporary postmodern condition.

7 Conclusion

From the time science fiction was formalized as serious literature, it has evolved as one of the primary genres with an extraordinary capacity to equip us to get a better understanding of the contemporary world. By offering compelling new

insights into the intricate complexities of the postmodern world, science fiction offers a steady commentary on all the aspects of our life. At the intersection of the real world and the new technology, there emerged a space for hitherto unknown emancipatory possibilities: possibilities that youth subcultures appropriated for subversive ends and thus paved the way for vibrant cyberculture. Cyberpunk fiction, emerging as a fictional response from those who felt an affinity with cybercultures, cashed in on the new possibilities with its exemplary invocation of the potential for technology to redefine the human body and the real world. Gibson's onslaught on to this landscape with his exemplary cyberpunk narratives pushed the boundaries of hitherto niche cyberculture. Energised by Gibson's path-breaking fiction, cyberpunk and cyberculture emerged as the definitive cultural modes with the potential for helping us comprehend the significance of the avalanche of technology-induced changes that beset the contemporary world. Hence, by being acutely perceptive of vagaries of the postmodern world, Gibson's novels figure as astute reflections on the present age.

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